

**Testimony of Gary W. Meier, Superintendent  
Ferndale Public Schools  
Before the Michigan House Education Committee  
November 10, 2010**

Good morning honorable committee members.

**I. Introduction**

My name is Gary Meier, superintendent of the Ferndale Public Schools in southeast Michigan. As a career superintendent, I have more than 30 years of experience as an educator. Since 1981, I have served as a superintendent in four districts in both Ohio and Michigan. I have been superintendent of the Ferndale Public Schools since 2000. My school district has made great strides in the past decade to ensure all students succeed, receive equitable, quality instruction, and benefit from full services made possible by sound financial management. Throughout my tenure in the Ferndale Schools, our teachers, administrators and staff have dedicated themselves to ensuring every child receives quality services and instruction, every day.

The Ferndale Schools look like America – our students are real kids from a full range of socio-economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. We are located in southern Oakland County adjacent to Detroit. We have always been a diverse community, today serving more than 60% African-American students and 40% White students. Our student population is very mobile, and the majority of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

- We provide a rich, comprehensive curriculum, including elementary foreign language and instrumental music for all students, and we celebrate our student successes continually.
- Our Roosevelt Primary School has received national recognition for employing research-based brain development strategies which affected the entire school culture and increased student achievement.
- Another example of our successes is our Ferndale Marching Band which *just* won the state marching band championship in their division for the 6<sup>th</sup> time.

- And our University High School students *just* won five trophies in the international Convergence Foundation Innovative Vehicle Design competition. Earlier this year, University High School was also recognized for innovation, student achievement and board leadership by the National Association of School Boards.

These are our most recent successes and we celebrate that our students make their mark thanks to the talent and dedication of an extraordinary teaching staff and community of volunteers.

## II. **Commitment to Accountability**

We know that winning band competitions can't fully measure the success or failure of a school district, but we also know that without our commitment to continuously improving our instructional and curricular programs, these successes would not be possible.

For the past decade we have increased our focus on teaching and learning, and on student achievement with an unwavering commitment to closing the achievement gap among African-

American students, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged students, and all other students.

We measure success in many ways, and with the creation of our University High School in 2005, established a goal of ensuring all of our UHS graduates would be college ready and experience success in college through to graduation.

At UHS, high school graduation is only a step along the way. We have learned a great deal about successfully preparing all students for college success, and have implemented many of those strategies at Ferndale High School, as well.

I will tell you more about our students' success stories in a few moments.

### III. **MI-SAAS Misses the Mark**

My real purpose though today is to share my evaluation of the proposed accreditation and accountability standard for Michigan's schools, MI-SAAS. I'm here as the superintendent of a small, school district serving 4,000 urban and suburban students, and I believe the proposed system will only be harmful to our district.

In fact, I also believe the proposed measures will be counterproductive and has the potential to penalize all but a select few schools in our state. And furthermore, I don't believe, as an educator, that we can afford to allow that to happen to our schools, our students, or our communities.

a. **UHS Successes vs. Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools**

I believe it is important for you to know our new University High School, which I spoke to you about briefly, is one of the schools identified on the Persistently Lowest Achieving List of schools in Michigan. This means that under this proposed plan UHS would be unaccredited. Having acknowledged there is more to the UHS story, I ask you to think about UHS as you consider the impact this plan would have on my school district, as well as other school districts across the state.

I want to take a few minutes to focus on our comprehensive measurements of success in contrast to the multiple rigid measures of MI-SAAS, which, as they are currently designed, could vastly increase the number of unaccredited schools across the state.

The Ferndale Schools entered into a commitment to an educational reform model high school in 2005 by creating University High School. Our UHS is designed to serve the needs of urban learners who enter in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade from across the Detroit area.

Although the majority of students enter with academic deficits, we've established a college-going culture, a rigorous curriculum and innovative instructional strategies have helped students achieve measureable growth, not only in graduating from high school, but in entering college and achieving success there.

**Our Class of 2008**, the first UHS graduating class, had a high school graduation rate of 99%, the second highest of all Oakland County high schools that year.

**Graduates of our UHS Class of 2009**, for example, entered a wide range of universities and colleges across our state, and nationally, last fall. By the end of their first year, 85% of the class had completed one year of college – even though the majority of them are the first in their family to go to college.

And, they beat the predictors' odds. Based on nationally normed ACT measures of success, only 3 to 4% of them were predicted to succeed in college. However, their average GPA was 2.49.

*I ask you: Does this describe a successful school?* Under the proposed MI-SAAS accountability system before you, we would not be accredited.

We consider COLLEGE SUCCESS the ultimate measure of our success in preparing our students for their futures as professionals who will help move Michigan forward.

**b. AYP does not completely measure Ferndale's Successes**

I want to repeat my point here: Despite our students' successes, under the current measures of Persistently Lowest Achieving Schools, and on the proposed measures of MI-SAAS, our University High School is not and could not be accredited. MI-SAAS creates more opportunities to fail than to succeed. I submit to the following points:

1. If schools are measured based on the current Persistently Lowest Achieving schools standard, based on student performance on a single test on a single day . . . We would not be and are not accredited.
2. If schools are measured on AYP, a growth and improvement pattern from year to year, some schools would not be accredited, even if their students scored well.
3. If a school did not meet any one of the compliance measures, it would not be accredited. And on this measure, I agree. Of course I do, these are standards school district administrators and their boards can control and ensure compliance on.



However, I want to emphasize that on the Top to Bottom ranking of student performance and AYP, the variable is who the students are. And these next three points are what is important for you to understand:

- **One size does not fit all.** That is, this evaluation method cannot fully measure the success of all schools, especially those serving urban students.
- **The old system was originally based on mastery**, which held the potential that everyone could achieve mastery. But this proposed new system, which pits schools through a head to head ranking, is designed so only 5% will be high achieving, and therefore, 5% must be lowest achieving. In this kind of system, there is no way everyone can be successful. In fact, the majority of schools cannot be successful under this measurement system.
- Such a measurement system would be **increasingly detrimental to the progress** we've made in serving urban learners.

IV. **Conclusion – Accountability is Important, MI-SAAS must be modified to really work for Michigan’s schools.**

I ask you today to evaluate the proposed accountability plan before you carefully. Please consider the arbitrary nature of the measures, and the fact, and I emphasize, the FACT that there are just too many ways to be declared unsatisfactory, or as the report defined it, “unaccredited.”

Reform measures are important, but please don’t endorse a system designed to penalize schools serving Michigan’s young people. You take a risk of creating a system where there is no hope. No chance for success.

Finally, I ask you to consider the future of Michigan. As parents who have the means and ability to move learn that their schools are “unaccredited” by a severe standard such as the proposed MI-SAAS, they will not only leave my community, they will leave our state. None of us can afford to allow that to happen.

I ask you to carefully evaluate the total effect of approving a plan such as the one you've received, keeping in mind today's children and tomorrow's future for our state.

Thank you very much for your time and for your consideration of the students of Michigan's schools.

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